
Build Trust Between You and Your Peers By Not Participating in: **Gossip in the Workplace**

Julia and Dennis work for the same company. Some days Dennis can barely face going to his job in the marketing department. "I enjoy my responsibilities, and the salary's great," he says, "but the atmosphere in marketing is hostile. There's so much backstabbing among the staff. I don't know if this company is for me."

"In the accounting department, we're a team," Julia says. "We trust each other and help each other out in a crunch. We're all very competitive, but in a way that encourages me to do my best. This company's a great place to work."

Same organization, two very different cultures. What is it about the accounting department that encourages attitudes like Julia's?

Organizations that value teamwork and cooperation as a way of doing business generally lack the wheel on which some organizations turn: the gossip mill. And the absence of gossip—half truths, rumors, speculations, even out-and-out lies—makes a big and beneficial difference in employee attitudes and productivity.

A nasty activity

The very word-gossip-hisses unpleasantly. Gossip divides people. It deflates morale, ruins trust among coworkers, and breeds competition and professional envy. It can destroy careers.

And it often starts innocently enough. We share small-talk with coworkers. Some of us become friends and share more.

Enjoying pleasantries and jokes is a normal part of work and can enhance the workplace.

It's fairly natural to want to know secrets or rumors, and then to want to pass those secrets on to our uninformed coworkers. If we hear gossip about someone at work, especially someone we find unpleasant or professionally threatening, the temptation can be irresistible to spread the information, embellishing the negatives and playing down or omitting the positives.

But beware, when workplace conversation degenerates into workplace gossip, trust and cooperation among coworkers decline.

Stopping the rumor mill

If gossip is hurting morale in your workplace, you can help turn things around.

First make sure your own lips aren't among the guilty. Examine your behavior honestly; have you slipped into the gossip habit? If so, vow to begin resisting the urge to purge. Before repeating casual information, ask yourself:

- Is it true? (Do I know this for sure? If not, let it lie.)
- Is it fair? (Could there be another side to this story? If so, drop it.)
- Is it helpful? (Even if it's true, even if it's fair, could this information hurt somebody? If so, let it stop with you.)

Second, don't lend your ears to gossip. Tell them you don't want to hear. Interrupt. Change the subject. Be skeptical. Walk away. Just don't listen.

Legal issues

Don't repeat what could be construed as a character slur. Slander and defamation of character suits are uncommon but not unheard of.

What if it's work-related news?

Some businesses are more volatile than others. They downsize, reorganize, buy each other out, expand, change management, change locations, change products. Such an atmosphere can be a feeding ground for rumors, and some employees thrive on wild speculations.

For your own peace of mind, consider the probabilities, but don't sweat over all the possibilities. If anxiety about rumors of workplace changes is affecting you, don't ignore it. Discuss doubts, worries and concerns with your supervisor when the feelings relate to your work performance. Talk with a neutral party such as an EAP counselor when the feelings relate to personal struggles.

Refuse to participate in false assumptions and gossip, and your discretion will help build trust between you and the people you work with.

Problems? An EAP counselor can help you evaluate and work through problems so you can begin to move toward solutions. Contacts with EAP are confidential and available to employees and their family members 24 hours a day, at no cost to you. Call (515)244-6090 or call toll free (800)327-4692.

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